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# Taking the punch: Utilizing unfortunate circumstances to reexamine personal identity

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**Rochester Institute of Technology**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

*Taking the Punch:*  
*Utilizing Unfortunate Circumstances to Reexamine Personal Identity*

by David A. Schnuckel

May 21, 2010



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Date: 5.12.2010

**Abstract:**

In this Thesis I will discuss my current body of work in regards to my interest in the essence of human fallibility and its role within personal transformation. In referencing historical glass, contemporary craft, and popular culture I discuss the virtues of crafting the mishap within my studio practice and of utilizing imagery within a sculptural context. The investigation questions what establishes personal identity whilst reexamining my own.

### **An Introduction:**

*He spilled his drink as he removed himself from the desk. “The well is primed,” he said, respectfully, albeit clumsily, moving his things to the side on his desk to dry. After making his way outside he stood still and looked to the side without turning his head, as if to speak at someone. With a boyish, deviant smile he slurred out before he sat, “I suppose I should start to pump...”*

Life writes many stories upon us, stories that make us who we are. I was a shy and awkward boy who took interest and comfort in the fictional glories of favorite super heroes within comic books and animated television. At the time, I believe the attraction was consciously toward the emphasis on color, simplistic shapes and fantastical sequencing of both action and suspense. However, now in hindsight I believe there was an unconscious response to the super hero as a model of the ideal...a being of thoroughly flawless characteristics physically, emotionally, intellectually and morally. My boyish aspirations of developing into an equally perfect being dissolved gradually year by year as maturity and experience revealed the fact that being human is actually quite the opposite of what I had once believed. I can't say that I take pleasure in my inadequacies and occasional lapse in judgment but I do acknowledge a certain significance within it. Comic book storylines have always been structured around the presence of conflict, portrayed traditionally between physical engagement between the hero and his or her nemesis. Although this aspect of comic books holds current contemporary relevance politically and socially, I find the concept of struggle to be of great fascination regarding an individual's perspective of the self. This thesis and the work exhibited to accompany it is based upon observations of my own shortcomings to explore my attraction to the ironic beauty within struggle, humility, folly and failure within the human experience as a factor in defining our own identity.

Late into my undergraduate career as a glassmaker I had begun to merge my interests in objects of glass history and comic books by assembling large renditions of a standard goblet shape and applying comic-oriented narratives on the surface. I had always been comfortable with writing, as well as with drawing, and my thesis work as an undergraduate served as a contemporary rendition in glass of what it was the ancient Greek civilization was doing with their ceramic production. Although it is easy to consider the work as merely being pots with pictures upon their surface, I identified not only with the decorative narratives applied to the work, but also to the theories applied to their formal composition. I had drawn a connection between their gods and our hero and deemed the connection with comics as a modern mythology; I identified with their mathematical value in the golden mean and modified it to my own proportional sensibilities within the structure of my work and considered the scale to reflect both the Greek value in domination and modern society's appetite for gluttony. The work produced during my graduate career is an extension of these interests: technically, I continued to push the complexity of scale within the blown and assembled glass components of my work and explored the controlled conduction of their stature -

deformed to further elicit an heir of defeat or symmetrically composed to serve as a sitting duck unaware of its vulnerability. Secondly, I had explored a variety of methods, means and materials in applying image and text upon a glass surface in service to the content of the piece by graphic means.

### **Chapter 1: Establishing Direction**

*“The biggest snag to anything I do is to simply get it started,” he said with eyes closed while rubbing his forehead adamantly with his left hand. “That’s the part of everything I do creatively that takes the most effort.” At that point he checked the time and sighed, knowing that there were a lot of things he wanted to discuss at such a late hour...*

I have always considered myself, even amidst childhood, to be nothing more than a typical individual – a common and ordinary young man with aspirations to accomplish extraordinary things. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons why I found comic books in my youth so appealing. As I readily admit, I was a quite reserved as a child, carrying a modest demeanor and keeping incredibly private. Aside from establishing a long-lasting value in humility, my social inadequacy as a child led me to take an interest in the fictional glories of the super hero and a curiosity as to how these characters accumulated such unique capabilities. Although the origins of each character I enjoyed reading about differed, I remember delighting most within the narratives that addressed how these fantastical figures acquired his or her supernatural abilities. The radical transformation of a mere mortal into a super imposed being was, and still is, my favorite back story - a



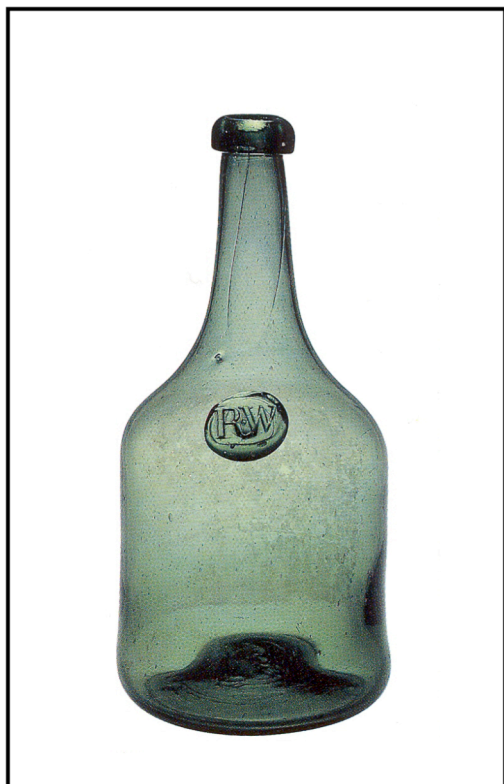
traditional storyboarding method established shortly after World War II utilizing experimental science to justify such fantastical human changes (Sanderson, 8). To an adolescent reader such as myself at the time, this style of explaining a super character’s origin provided me with a sense of optimism towards my own personal growth – that I, too, could possibly morph into something exemplary, admirable, and noteworthy. In hindsight, perhaps there was an unconscious response to the super hero as a model of the ideal...a being of thoroughly flawless characteristics physically, emotionally, intellectually, and morally. Although I don’t believe my adolescent mind to have been able to grasp or entertain concepts involving “perfection” I do remember having hopeful ambitions that I would become something along those lines. My boyish, underdeveloped mind couldn’t define just what that “something” was quite yet...nor what motivated me to have such an impulse.

Since my youth I have come to recognize that comic books had, undoubtedly, left a tremendous impression upon me. They are responsible for my interest in images and drawing. They are responsible for my interest in words and writing. They are responsible for my value for imagination and making. But, most importantly, they are responsible for laying the conceptual foundation with which I've built my artistic development upon. Initially, the superhero comic character was adopted as a personal and legitimate catalyst for change. However, the ideals represented within traditional heroic fantasy that I had been inspired by during my adolescence do not translate well during such an antiheroic age that we live in at present. My boyish aspirations of developing into an equally "perfect" being dissolved gradually year by year as maturity and experience revealed the fact that being human is actually quite the opposite of what I had once believed. I can't say that I take pleasure in my personal inadequacies or moments of fault and failure, but I do acknowledge a certain significance within it. Aside from their visual potency, comic books have served as a personally relevant medium that examines difficult issues simply in the way in which the stories are canonically structured (Marcoci, 9). These elements of personal conflict, questioning identity, and of undergoing radical transformations are the thematic pillars to every comic book character narrative. However, they are also key aspects to the purpose of my making...not to mention my motives behind pursuing graduate study.

Psychologically, I have been given a mind since birth that has denied itself any natural sense of pride or self-worth. Once this had been recognized I had turned to the arts and worked diligently to prove my own value unto myself by what I can do rather than by who I naturally am. The medium of glass and the process of blowing it, as it seems, is a perfect material and process for those of us who obsess about control or, in my case, making things right...literally and figuratively. The objects that I would shape have always been formally crafted with the utmost of sensitivity, grace, and emotional investment as if they were a physical extension of my own self...in fact, a better version of myself. Glassblowing has always been pursued with an impulse to change my identity in a highly superficial manner – a venue where the sharp division between two unreconciled sides of my personality, the ideal self and the actual self, can exist together in the process of making. Pipes and punties had been my rendition of the cape and cowl and I defined myself - designated value upon myself - in relation to the quality with which I could handle the material. Eventually, I became disenchanted with the idea of pursuing virtuosic glassblowing abilities and glasswork that exists only to be regarded as stunning objects. I had realized that I was but a glassblower and that an artist doesn't particularly pursue the making of things, but that they try to make a meaningful understanding of things – achieving an aspect of beauty within work that is based on intellectual and emotional stimulation rather than on a purely visual standpoint. As I had mentioned previously, the origin stories of comic book super-characters that I had appealed to most as a child maintain their relevancy: of ordinary people undergoing accidental scientific procedures. Although these characters had experienced lethal exposure to some scientifically fictional situations, these victims, instead of dying, transformed into a significantly different being. The motives behind my Thesis work (and attending graduate school at all) were along the same lines: to dramatically alter the way I think about and conduct my making. As an American artist who primarily works

with blown glass I began by investigating my “origins”...reevaluating my identity in accordance to the heritage of this particular material within the cultural context of my native country.

The first industry that was established to fuel the economy of Colonial America was bottle making (Zerwick, 71). Glass was a preferred material to create mass-produced, blown, and finished containers for alcohol, milk, and fluids of medicinal purpose. The bottle was a simple object that provided the general public substances to nurture, refresh, heal, or inebriate the consumer. In being ultimately of utilitarian purpose, the bottle historically represents itself as being a manufactured item – simple in design and direct in purpose. Due to the industrial aspect of its creation, the bottle has always been considered an object of temporary value. Once its contents were gone, the bottle served its owner of no importance. Setting aside the relatively modern ecological sensitivity towards recycling glass containers, I find the bottle to represent a very tragically poetic character in the history of glass objects...a thing whose production (whether made historically by hand or contemporarily by machine) is conducted in an



unskilled manner, whose purpose is of a highly temporary significance, and as a result, easily discarded. In regarding images of early American bottle production I was moved by the gestural quality of its mass-produced aesthetic. The rough posture and loose craftsmanship of the early bottle makers seemed to coincide with my reflections of the bottle as the rough and tumble poster child of historical glass...the underdog or unsung hero amidst the long line of staple products associated within the family of blown glass objects. As opposed to the Venetian goblet or the Islamic mosque lamp, the aesthetic of the early American bottle seems to represent an element of vigor and spirit – a take-it-or-leave-it sort of formal quality – that isn’t as present within the posh and pomp of all other blown objects of historical glass. The essence of its loose posturing – its “fuck you, I am what I am” style of craftsmanship - made me think about perfection in an entirely different way.

Prior to my examination of these bottles, “perfection” was entirely based on the flawless craftsmanship of my making – an obsession in control with an ambition for mastery. These inclinations are not only strong within my handling of the material, but naturally implanted within the way I consciously pursue anything. I cannot abandon or ignore this aspect of my making, however I was inspired by the emotive capabilities of the slackened posture of early American produced bottles...leading me to consider introducing the intentional “mishap” within the forming of my glass components. It was

really a matter of changing my perspective in regards to what constitutes as a qualitative manner of making or of “craftsmanship”. It was still involving an element of control, but of a different kind: an attempt to study and utilize the idea of glass deformation... manipulating or disrupting a symmetrical form in ways that are unique only to this particular material.

The bottle, as simple as it may seem, is also a highly iconic visual motif, full of mystique and powerful connotations...especially once emptied and considered “useless.” A final observation upon the significance of it as an object is that it is one of multiple personalities, or of para-functional design as put by Anthony Dunne: an object whose initial use can be extended upon and, due to human imagination and intuition, transform human perception, consciousness, and relation to our surroundings (67). Interestingly enough, the bottle has been given a variety of new identities or purposes far beyond just a container of beverage. Whether by metaphorical association or by functional reinvention under peculiar circumstances, the bottle is at its poetic best once its initial purpose has been served...an ordinary thing of serving tremendously extraordinary purposes. In reconsidering an empty bottle’s function (i.e. the bottle rocket, the Molotov Cocktail, the practice of recycling, etc.), the human imagination has resurrected its sense of purpose, and, therefore, prescribed upon it new sense of worth.

A second interest in bottle production that was incorporated within the Thesis work was in regard to the graphic aspect of my making. The bottle is also an object known to host imagery and text in a variety of ways over time. To indicate the contents of a bottle, the origins of its production, or to serve as a marketable piece of ornamentation, the label had always served as an “identifying” agent. The label, whether designed to be purely informative or as a decorative icon, allowed me to reconsider the way in which I applied graphic content to the surface of my glass. Also, it was a personal indication that my impulse to write and draw on three-dimensional things, most notably *glass* things, is a practice that runs deep historically...connecting me with artisans from previous eras by a shared interest of embellishing a vessel surface. I was interested in investigating traditional manners of incorporating imagery and text with the new work,



but was also intending to consider methods and materials that are not typically associated with glass ornamentation. In fact, the Thesis Work was pursued with certain objectives I had in considering and integrating the graphic aspect of my making: to relate the graphic content specifically to the nature of the bottle’s form and to relate the narrative and the



object hosting it within a sculptural context. I wanted the work to read as something more than in simply being a glass object hosting graphic content – that the object, the nature of the object’s disfiguration, imagery, and/or text would depend on one another to communicate meaning. Along the same purposes that the label originally intended to do for its bottle, the application of imagery and text within the Thesis work was meant to provide further insight into its proverbial “content.”

Therefore, the work during my Thesis year was to investigate several things: 1.) to competently study the mishandling of the blown form, 2.) to investigate new methods and materials in applying image and/or text upon a glass surface, 3.) to think about the relationship between the graphic elements of my work and how it relates to the nature of the formal body it sits upon, and 4.) to utilize a variety of materials aside from glass to complete a piece.

## **Chapter 2: The Work**

*He poured himself another beverage within his cup. The tilt of the bottle was awkward and immediate, steeper than it needed to be and causing his glass to fill faster than expected. Although his response time was slow, he snapped the angle of the bottle upright with urgency, stopping the contents of his glass to overflow just at the brim of its lip. He raised his eyebrows and concentrated on the glass, of what sort of mess that could have occurred. He smirked sheepishly, “I don’t usually do anything unless I have to...”*

I’ve never considered myself a skilled glass blower as much as I have a competent one. My work has always relied on an element of assemblage...blowing meticulously crafted and proportionate parts to then assemble cold in an equally attentive manner. In considering the elements of a bottle form I would fabricate my work for the Thesis Exhibition in at least two different segments: the bottle body and the neck. There were a couple pieces where I created glass elements that would serve as a third component: an open-ended, squatty cylinder specifically blown and cold worked to be slipped over top of the bottle neck to rest and conceal where the neck and body meet. The “collar”, as I refer to it as, was simply meant to be a decorative component whose only purpose was to hide the glue seam. Every piece within my Thesis Exhibition had gone through an extensive process of trial and error in order for me to figure out how to technically and visually actualize the details of each piece as I had originally envisioned them. This element of repetition and redundancy is very common in my studio practice. I’m not interested in simply making glass as much as I am in figuring out how to blow and “sculpt” parts in ways that specifically cater to an idea I feel strongly about. It should be also noted that each piece within the Thesis Exhibition was made in a particular order. Each objective in exploring various methods of disrupting the form, as well as the application of the imagery, led to new understandings or revelations that informed the pursuit of the next piece. The way in which I will speak of the work within this chapter



will honor that progression. The content of this chapter will address the conceptual framework initiating the making of each piece, the technical approaches in giving shape to and mishandling the form in relation to these ideas, as well as the methods and purposes in which the graphic content cohesively contributes to the conceptual significance of the piece.

One of the immediate associations I made with the bottle was in the idea of consumption and regret...the tendency for one to drown his or her sorrows in order to distract them from what it is they find internally troubling. Often carried to a gluttonous point of inebriation, I find it interesting that the aftermath results in the individual experiencing quite a bit of tremendous physical misery that outweighs – or perhaps contributes further unto– that which he or she was troubled by emotionally in the first place. The piece “A Fine Connoisseur of Regret” was pursued in a manner that reflects upon this sense of loathing and remorse that is often associated with the bottle. The form itself was a symmetrically blown object that was then manipulated in order to give it a



bowed stance. After the initial shape was established I then used a torch to selectively heat a small segment of the body while the rest of the piece remained chilled and, therefore, stable. Once the targeted area was significantly “softer” than the remainder of the piece I “capped” the pipe following a deep reheat, held the piece up high in the air and let gravity naturally sag the object until it began to double-over. The result of this hot shop method of deformation enabled me to achieve a certain kind of subtle buckling, mimicking a stature that references the human position of hunching over at the height of nausea. The bottle in this case, as it arguably does in the remainder of the work within the Thesis Exhibition, strongly incorporates the poetic device of personification in the form of an object...the bottle being attributed human characteristics to represent an abstracted quality of the human form.

The graphic elements applied unto “A Fine Connoisseur...” were in relation to the defeated disposition of its stature. In using the traditional wine label as a point of reference, I utilized certain areas on the front and back of the bottle to place imagery and text in accordance with the placement of a standard wine label. Non-traditional materials to ornament a glass surface, such as spray paint and Sharpie markers, were used – coating

the surface with a layer of matte white Krylon to imitate a paper label and portraying three scenes of a male character physically experiencing the unpleasant effects of nausea. Text was utilized with a consideration of the bottle's transparency – applying Letraset press-on letters to compose a cluttered arrangement of thought behind the pictorial activity on the bottle's surface. The text is only recognizable when viewed *through* the object...hidden by the pictorial elements when viewed straight on, yet evident when looking *within* the piece from the opposite side from where it was applied. The text, therefore, reads incoherent in that it presents itself backwards and in reverse...a mess of thought that the viewer has to struggle and really commit to deciphering in order to make sense of it. However, the idea of “looking into” the piece to comprehend the textural information triggers associations with the human tendency to regard things in hindsight...of assessing the value of a situation or event after it has happened. Whether or not the experience of introspection leads toward a pleasant realization, the human tendency to try and comprehend a situation well after it has happened is a natural method of reconsidering his or her own character - when perspective is much clearer than it was in the moment of a pivotal situation. The visual implication of the formal stature and nauseated imagery of “A Fine Connoisseur...” lends towards the bottle's metaphorical association with a temporary lapse in judgment and personal submission. However, this led me to consider how I could use the bottle motif within my work to evoke utter defeat.

Aside from the symbolic capability of the bottle as a singular object, I also had an interest in the metaphorical potential of it within a grouping: the poetically dismal arrangement of empty 40 ounce alcoholic containers often found amidst the ground in an impoverished urban environment. The 40 ounce bottle is a container that is characteristically marketed to withhold cheap beer or malt liquor...low-quality booze selling at an inexpensive price and, therefore, often serving as a staple accessory for the homeless or low-income individual - a liquid remedy for his or her despair. The piece “Congregants of Lost Cause and Lamentation” was inspired by this cultural phenomenon by blowing several proportionally enhanced 40 ounce based bottles in order to arrange them in a discarded manner. As a result from my investigation of the previously mentioned piece, I recognized that the nature in which I was intending to contort these blown forms couldn't be done as effectively within the hot shop. My intentions were to create these bottle forms so that they would formally warp in a much more dramatic manner. I didn't want them to bend as much as I wanted them to fall heavily within themselves individually...to collapse more than buckle. It was important to me that these particular bottles visually indicated the sensation of being impaired, to become formally limp and incapable of standing. This objective led me to think beyond relying entirely on the hot shop to manipulate each piece's shape.

I would blow each bottle shape intentionally thin within its midsection and, after it was annealed, utilize the slumping process to have it shrivel in a much more natural manner. Without using my own hand and intuition to bend it, I would let heat from the kiln and gravity transform the shape. Once the kiln was up to an effective temperature, I would crack the kiln door every so often to see how the glass was responding. Once the form was kinked to my satisfaction I would grab the object with gloves and remove it from the kiln, letting the door remain open. Being outside of the kiln in an atmosphere of

room temperature, the stature of the form would stiffen up as I held it into the open air, holding it like a hot, crying, and pissed-off toddler straight ahead of me. Meanwhile, the kiln crashed to an adequate temperature to anneal the piece without further slumping. The bottle would be put back in the kiln at this point and I would initiate a proper program for the kiln to bring the bottle down properly without any further movement. This was the process that was implicated for all nine objects and the process changed their shape in ways too complicated and asymmetrically graceful than one could render in the hot shop. The manner in which the form's walls ebbed and flowed was quite fluid, yet their overall structure rendered them unable to stand upright. The stability of the bottles in "Congregants..." depended heavily on the placement of all the others neighboring it. On an individual basis, each bottle was only capable of lying pathetically on the ground. Yet, when nestled tight against others within close proximity, their formal inconsistencies enabled the bottles to "fit" amidst one another in a seemingly disordered manner. Their positioning amidst one other implied a sense of incapacitation, which, in turn, made for a very pathetic grouping of dysfunctional and defeated characters.



The "Skid Row" element of this piece also incorporated the consideration and inclusion of the brown bag within its completion. Most commonly associated with the 40 ounce bottle, the brown bag serves as a form of packaging within the purchase of alcohol and, further yet, acts as a concealing agent for impoverished consumers to indulge in drinking its contents while in public. The brown bag, in many states, enables the consumer to bypass "open container" laws by hiding the nature of the beverage within the bag that it was purchased in. I was specifically interested in how these down-and-out consumers would twist and compress the bag around the bottle as they drank out of

it...how it defined the shape of its contents and indicated the bottle without revealing the actual object itself. It led me to think of the paper bag as a skin that could not only visually define the curvaceous buckling of my renditions of the 40 ounce bottle, but also serve as a porous surface to draw upon.

I accumulated many standard paper bags, disassembled and opened them into flat sheets and glued them together – fabricating them into an assembled sheet large enough to wrap itself around my proportionally enhanced 40's. These sheets were then soaked in a liquid treatment consisting of water and glue. The wet sheets were then wrapped around each bottle to snugly fit within every crease and crevasse of each individual bottle. Once dried, the glue within the mix hardened and allowed the thin paper to maintain its “visual cling” to the bottle. I would then apply paper bag fragments of hand drawn imagery onto each piece with a spray fixative. These images portrayed generic characters in scenes of consumption, inebriation, and defeat – all alluding to the nature of “skid row” living. Each bottle was, therefore, its own character within the arrangement; a cast of characters collected amidst one another in a very intimate way, yet conveying a sense of isolation due to the circumstances of their despair. Within “Congregants...” the bottle was investigated as a vessel of personal deflation. However, I was also interested in the capability of the bottle to be an object that can contradict this association and just as easily be regarded as an object capable of self-preservation and retaliation.

Although more readily considered as an object of self-destruction, the empty bottle has historically been utilized as a vessel literally capable to inflict ruin, havoc, and devastation upon *others* in the form of a Molotov Cocktail. In this case, the bottle assumes the role of a weapon and, as a vessel, withholds combustible fluids and a rag wick...lit and tossed famously by impoverished Finnish citizens during the Winter War of 1939 at invading Soviet Red Army troops and tanks. The conflict was a classic against-all-odds underdog scenario: the impecunious Finnish victim who relied on working with what little was available in a highly innovative manner to protect and defend their land and livelihood from a trained and well-funded aggressor. The Molotov Cocktail, as it is recorded, was a highly effective makeshift device that enabled the Finnish victory against the Red Army, gaining notoriety through its usage within this conflict due to its impact. In this light, the Molotov Cocktail peaked my interest in the bottle as a catalyst for social and political change, although, when empty, seemingly useless and void of purpose. The transformative nature of the bottle serving a greater good when its initial contents are emptied touches upon something of a greater fascination: the unforeseen purpose of a seemingly ineffective thing - the mystique of destiny.

I utilized the Molotov Cocktail as a formal motif to speak about the spirit of the human reaction to unjust treatment within the piece “Our Failure Gives Them Pleasure.” The bottle itself was blown in several parts to be cut and ground into segments proportionally fitting to one another – stacked and assembled to become a bottle of epic proportion. My intentions were to prepare all the parts as symmetrical and proportionally harmonious as possible in order for its stature to be uncontrollably effected by the process of applying and firing the graphic content upon each segment's surface.

Imagery was applied by way of ceramic decals...a thin film of printed graphics affixed to the surface of the glass, fired within a kiln, and, therefore, becoming a permanent mark upon the piece. The imagery applied by decal was an assortment of symbols and characters found and drawn based upon illustrated Soviet propaganda posters of the time when Molotov Cocktails had gained notoriety. The illustrative nature of the imagery within these posters were of a cartoonish quality and I took a curiosity within its visual relationship to the style of imagery composed in comic book narrative: vibrantly warm color schemes, black outlines enveloping each element, and the simplistic rendering of people and things. The posters had a thematic emphasis on the militaristic and industrial nature of that particular era and my drawings mimicked many notable characters that were consistently portrayed: iconic figures such as the soldier and the laborer and symbols such as the star, the hammer and sickle, and the smokestack. Although I didn't carry a personal connection to that culture or that particular historical conflict, I did identify with the nature of the story: of the individual caught within a pivotal moment of personal struggle uncertain of finding resolve. The overwhelming nature in which conflict bombards the human psyche was responsible for the impulse in which I had arranged the imagery.

The decals were applied upon each segment of "Our Failure..." in an incoherent



manner...imagery riddling the transparent surface of the piece to reference the invasive presence of the antagonist of this particular story. By engulfing the object with "foreign" entities, the imagery was used to disturb the tranquility of the bottle's surface overall. The decals also serve an ironic purpose as hostile decoratives, speaking about the history of glass ornamentation with tongue in cheek. The purpose of embellishing the surface of a glass object, especially when involving portraiture, is usually meant to enhance its visual allure, to mark a special occasion, or to acknowledge a significant individual - intentions to permanently beautify or maintain a legacy. However, having an object as ephemeral as a Molotov Cocktail fancily adorned with pictorial ornamentation indicates the narrative's temporary significance – only fully appreciated while engulfed within the flames and chaos it was responsible for starting after being tossed.



However, the decals that I was using fire at a high temperature. Placing hollow forms within the kiln to undergo such a process meant that the parts of “Our Failure...” that were decaled would become structurally vulnerable to the heat within the firing. Due to the wall thickness and the height of each glass component, the firing process introduced a subtle wilting of each segment. Once annealed, I found that the alignment of the entire piece, each segment stacked upon another, resulted in a slightly bowed bottle form...an object “bending under pressure” and visually alluding to it being tossed. The fabric that was incorporated within the piece served a couple of visual functions – although a staple component in the function of the Molotov Cocktail as an incendiary device, it also served as a white backing to the decaled imagery and sharply defined the translucent images applied on the surface. The experience gained from “Our Failure...” led me to think about the manipulation of the form during decal firing process in a more intentional manner.

At this point I began considering the metaphorical significance of the susceptibility of glass within the firing process – especially in my pursuit of dramatically disrupting its symmetrical stature. In these bottle forms being blown first and then undergoing additional firings I had found through this sort of “hands-off” method of deformation that hollow glass is easily impressionable and highly responsive to heat and gravity within the confined space of a kiln. I began equating its submission to these factors to the nature of human decompression as a result of an individual’s obliviousness to the many external factors that misshape his or her human experience.

Within the history of American glass production, there was a period of time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century where tableware and decorative kitsch was created with what is referred to as Vaseline Glass. The glass itself had much public appeal for its yellow-green tint, giving it a peculiar fluorescence due to the Uranium added into that particular glass’ batch recipe. The fad of producing and purchasing Vaseline Glass declined dramatically during World War II due to the color association between yellow and cowardice and completely lost public fascination in the 1950s due to reading low-levels of toxicity by means of a Geiger counter. Increasing public concern over the radioactive ingredient and tightened safety precautions within using it in glass manufacturing had ultimately led to the production of Vaseline Glass to a quick extinction (Skelcher 15). Fascinated by the health risks involved in blindly consuming food or beverage served from objects of a nuclear substance, I pursued the formal and graphic elements of my next piece influenced by this peculiar instance within historical glass production.

In thinking about radioactive nature of Vaseline Glass I pursued the piece “Our Defense Was Built Upon Obedience and Gullibility” to formally alter the form as if it were melting under its own radioactivity. In applying color to the piece that mimicked the yellow-green tint of Vaseline Glass, I blew bottle shapes that would then be slightly manipulated towards the end of its creation in the hot shop. I blew the mid section intentionally thinner than the rest of the piece and, using a hand torch, heated the midsection of the bottle body to only further expand that selected area. The introduction of my breath allowed it to bulge as the rest of the piece remained stiff and unaltered.

Upon one last reheat the over inflated portion of the bottle would soften more readily while in the glory hole, allowing it to buckle and collapse on itself. At the point of its total collapse I would swiftly remove the piece from the glory hole, cap the mouthpiece, and hold the pipe entirely upright so as to have the bottom of the piece towards the ground. On the floor laid a paddle on which I set the base of the piece upon while contouring the form with subtle twisting and compression, pushing the piece slightly into itself while on top of the paddle. The resulting form was of a crumpled nature – the walls of the softened midsection buckling and collapsing in a way reminiscent of the pruned exterior of a raisin. At that point, the piece was put away to anneal in order to apply decals and further manipulate the form through the decal firing process.



In recognizing the flexibility of the unfired decal, I wanted to apply them in a way that could take advantage of the bizarre contours that the buckled form provided. The imagery was selected from a vintage PSA manual published in the 1950s instructing American citizens of what to prepare for in the event of nuclear fallout. The time frame of that publication was important to me in selecting images for “Our Defense...” in that the period of Vaseline Glass production subsided just as the American awareness of nuclear attack was heightening. I took special interest in the oblivious etiquette of the manual’s instruction, dumbing down the horrific reality of a nuclear attack to install a sense of tranquility within the American citizen in preparation for such a catastrophic event. My observations of these graphic elements were similar to the previous source material of the Soviet propaganda poster: each

image of the Fallout Manual was published in an illustrative, comic-style aesthetic. Text was also incorporated within “Our Defense...” as I composed many small ironic phrases on par with the instructional tone of the manual inspired by each particular image, using a vintage font that related to the time period. Upon firing the decals, the form proceeded to further buckle and slump into itself. Although still capable of standing, each bottle within the “Our Defense...” series truly indicated a highly withered stature to a point

where each bottle appeared as if to be truly melting. The decals naturally moved along with the glass, contorting and even being trapped within portions of the bottle's wall that collapsed upon itself. "Our Defense..." surrendered its formal self in a way that spoke of the kind of oblivious susceptibility that interested me about the psychological capability of the American public to trust in things and people they have no security in believing in ...although they continually do.



The bottle also serves as an object of innocent witness, on hand within close proximity during violent moments that occur based on the influence of its contents. There is a romantic association that the whiskey bottle has based on the generalized personal character of those who frequently consume it. The drink itself is a highly potent alcoholic liquid of fermented grains...an overwhelmingly harsh taste and smell, accompanied by a considerably effective volume of alcohol. It's a rough drunk ingested straight by rough-and-tumble folks...often the token beverage of such iconic figures such as the blue collar worker, the criminal, and the cowboy to name a few. The whiskey bottle had always represented itself to me as a prop within moments of physical confrontations due to the aggressive qualities of the previously mentioned characters within narratives portrayed

within film or graphic novels – most notably of the Western genre. Physical conflict between two opposing tavern "patrons" within these narratives is usually initiated with a whisky bottle near emptied and close by. The piece "Spillage at the Tavern" was pursued with a curiosity towards the bottle as an inanimate object and it's hypothetical perspective of a brutal situation that took place due to the contents that it had provided.

The bottle was again blown in segments to stand at a height equivalent of a human's stature. It's scale lent towards an attempt to apply the poetic device of personification in a visual manner...of the bottle's stance alluding to the human form and, in its gentle deviation of symmetry at the neck, attributing towards it simulating



human concern. Decals were applied over a great majority of the bottle's surface and I had drawn a variety of cowboy scenes within a saloon to clutter and fire upon the transparent surface. Being fairly aware and understanding the firing process of these decals at this point, I was able to control the level of motion of the glass components while in the kiln. Each component of "Spillage at the Tavern" maintained its symmetrical stature, yet I let the bottleneck moderately bow. Slightly enabling the neck to bend gave the bottle an anatomical quality in it "craning" over to speculate the tragic scene below. The decals were placed in a tight, yet fitting, cluttered arrangement so that each image could visually integrate with the images directly behind it on the opposite wall of the bottle. Although the bottle, hypothetically, saw what it saw, the narrative upon its body represents itself as a confused and panicked portrayal of what the bottle, as a witness, had just seen. The ability of the clear glass to allow the imagery to interact with itself from various plains of sight also contributes to the variances in which the story could be told. Although regarding the same elements within that narrative, each viewer's account of what he or she understands about the incident beside the bottle depends entirely on how the piece is approached. This idea of "looking within" the piece to read into a portion of the narrative presented was unintentionally touching upon an interesting approach towards one person's "point of view"...of seeing things under the influence of the way in which the information is passed along second-hand.

This interest within the idea of regarding a pivotal moment during a traumatic experience was again investigated in a second piece using the bottle and the tavern-based situation. In heated moments of misunderstanding and physical conflict between two individuals, the beer bottle can transform immediately into a hand-held object of laceration. If grasped by the bottleneck it's body can be aggressively smashed upon the corner of the bar. As a result, the impact obliterates the bottle's end and creates a jagged, sharp, and lethal edge. Within the piece "Roughneck Sportsmanship" I had blown and assembled a large rendition of the beer bottle, yet saved my intentions for disfiguring it until after the decals had been applied and fired. The imagery I prepared were several frames of comic-based drawings of a hand-to-hand brawl between two individuals. The way in which the decals were placed upon the bottle's surface was to mimic the dimensions and placement of a beer bottle label...a segmented, yet unified, placement of imagery upon one side of the bottle. The firing was controlled, allowing the imagery to fuse upon the hollow form without disfiguring the bottle body.

Disrupting the piece, in this case, relied upon the properties of glass' ability to break as opposed to the previous explorations of its ability to bend. However, interestingly enough, heat was an integral element in manipulating the form while in a cold state. By positioning the bottle upside down on a banding wheel, I rocked the piece ever so slightly so that it would only partially turn a distance of one to two inches back and forth between these two points. I introduced a small flame from a hand-torch to this selected area and made sure to keep it steady as it heated this small, selected area. Previous to introducing the heat, I had made a small score mark with a glasscutter to introduce a stress point for which the flame could initiate the fragmentation from. The thermal shock of the high heat of the torch, coupled with limiting the contact point of the flame to the piece, enabled the bottle body to burst in a very inconsistent manner. This

manner of causing destruction unto the piece was an intentional deviation from the proper method of “hot-popping” a blown object – a method of cleanly segmenting blown forms without using a saw. The bottle, therefore, had acquired the jagged edge of one used within a bar-brawl that was as equally threatening, yet accomplished in a more conscientious manner.



The way in which “Roughneck Sportsmanship” was displayed was integral in conveying it’s maniacal nature. In considering the various ways in which bottles are kept in storage I had fabricated a wood stand reminiscent of the racks used in old-world dispensing companies. Following the process of brewing and bottling alcohol within these historical plants, the finished product would often be stored in slanted wooden racks. These racks were constructed out of flat lumber and drilled with a great number of holes. The dimensions of these holes were large enough to fit around the bottle’s neck, allowing each bottle to be inserted upside down, locked in place by gravity, and held at a drastic upward angle. Due to the combative implication that this method of holding a bottle has, I incorporated the way in which the piece was to be presented by having the broken bottle held within its own storage

apparatus. Rather than appearing as a device to simply exhibit the piece, the rack used within “Roughneck Sportsmanship” holds the bottle as one would within a moment of aggression: poised and ready to either defend or viciously attack. Aside from enabling the broken edge to be “drawn” upon the viewer, the rack also enabled the imagery of the decals to be viewed from behind. In utilizing the transparency of glass I again wanted the narrative to be regarded as if the sequence of events were being inspected in hindsight, placing the bottle within the rack so as to have the surface which hosts the decals facing the ground.

The work that had been completed for the Thesis Exhibition was a true attempt in beginning to consider utilizing glass, imagery, and word within a sculptural context. The previous content was a written account of the decisions made in physically actualizing ideas concerning personal identity, which, for me, resulted in some highly transformative

work. The growth acquired in pursuing the intentional mishap within the formal structure of these pieces, as well as the various processes and intentions of the graphic content, broadened my technical abilities as an artist. It had also established a stronger understanding of the motives, values, and personal philosophies in creating work in the way in which I do. These new revelations concerning my relationship with glass and my utilization of imagery, especially within a contemporary context, will be the topics of review within the following chapters.

### **Chapter 3: Crafting the Mishap**

*His mouth was dry. Looking at the scenery beyond him, he paused and took a moment to recover a lost thought. Not wanting to make his company wait in his silent consideration he made an awkward sound to fill the silence. He closed his eyes hard and squeezed them unnaturally shut for an awkwardly long period of time, quickly trying to retrieve his next point. He was embarrassed by how long it was taking him...*

As previously mentioned within an earlier chapter, the intended pursuit to explore a competent mishandling of the glass form within the Thesis Exhibition was originally an attempt to “let go” of the tendency to create work of strict and symmetrical stature. However, what I had come to realize is that my pursuit of understanding the ways in which I could malform glass contradicted my initial objective of surrendering control within these exploratory methods of reinterpreting a fixed shape. As a matter of fact, I only surrendered my reliance upon the grandeur of symmetry; in hindsight, control was still a very eminent part of my making. However it was a study of “controlling” the deformation of the work at a distance in most cases...not by altering it by my own hand, but by the circumstances of time, temperature, and gravitational pull. If my understanding of craftsmanship previous to the Thesis Work was defined by the thought, care, and understanding of one who handles his or her tasks in a qualitative manner, then I was certainly still obedient to those principles. The only difference is that the processes of disrupting each piece’s symmetrical nature relied more upon my eyes than they did my hands. The idea of “letting go” is perhaps more of a figurative way of explaining the distance at which my hands were in pursuing the element of imperfection within my making.

I have recognized a natural tendency to heavily invest in the “proper” handling of glass while working with the material in its molten state: of keeping things centered, moving fluidly, touching and tooling it conscientiously. Glass has a way of taunting the craftsman in all of us who come into contact with it. Its behavior is so mysterious and so unlike anything else...demanding those of us with a passionate spirit to understand the things we’re fascinated by to commit our entire attention to and thoughts about. The more experience gained with working with glass, the more fulfilling the practice actually becomes and the more engaged we become in it. In becoming practitioners, the idea of “doing things well” easily transforms into “getting things right” – a mentality that often

lends towards the obsession of perfecting our interaction with the material. This obsession, for me, gave way to having a personal sense of order...a reassurance in having influence upon an external entity rather than of being the object shaped and mishandled within the turbulence of the human experience.

It's also evident that the human instinct to dominate control within the process of blowing glass is often a struggle of a highly pretentious nature. In this case, the quest for perfection within the hot shop serves as an aspiration to actually achieve a sense of self worth based on what the maker can do rather than who the maker naturally is. The act of blowing glass, in this sense, is often pursued in a highly masturbatory way...a method of stimulating one's own esteem and an attempt to impress others by affecting greater importance than what is actually possessed. The commitment towards integrating the deformational aspect within the Thesis Work was twofold: in wanting to utilize my making as a practice of humility and to integrate my interest in the presence of situational mishaps within the human experience during into each piece's creation.

I had invested a lot of time, effort, and emotion into giving life to each piece as formally precise and impeccable as I possibly could. Proportionally sound drawings were composed of actual bottles that I was to faithfully reinterpret at the bench; the way in which I handled the material was with the utmost of care, competency, and grace; every insignificant detail of the formal arrangement of each piece was considered and tended to. It was important to me that the work reflected the utmost of my thought, care, and consideration in their making in the hot shop – not because I was concerned with eliciting a sense of formal majesty, but because it was essential to be as thoroughly invested within the glass' undoing as it was within its initial creation. Although I had plans in going about the processes of formally disrupting each piece, the way in which the glass would respond to each process was more uncertain in some instances than others. Amidst all the work created for the Thesis Exhibition, there seemed to have been only two schools of thought in the way in which the various modes of deformation had been pursued: willfully integrating the mishap in the hot shop or leaving the mishap to occur by chance.

Manipulating the slight bend in the piece “A Fine Connoisseur of Regret” and the preliminary buckling in the piece “Our Defense Was Built Upon Obedience and Gullibility” involved taking certain measures in the actual handling of the glass to achieve a specific shape. In these cases, the intent of crafting the hot shop-based mishap is more conspiratorial than coincidental in that the nature of the disfigurement is plotted. Although the destiny of the glass was literally in my hands, they had served no purpose in actually “impressing” the bend or creating the creases. Instead, they were merely involved with the preliminary processes of establishing the condition of each piece (i.e. intentional wall thinness, selected heating) in order to helplessly submit to the factors of heat and gravity accordingly. Although not basing his utilization of the intentional mishap via heat, a similar instance of conspiratorially crafting a glass object's ruin is seen within the work of Peter Ivy.

Internationally recognized as a virtuosic blower, Ivy is equally renowned for relying on his skillful ability within the hot shop as a means to a highly intriguing end following the annealing process. “Comet” is formally composed as a spouted blown glass cylinder, crafted in a highly clean and competent manner. Upon closer inspection of the vessel one can see small pebbles or stone bits trapped within the wall and several fractures crawling around certain segments of the object’s body. Although pure speculation, one might assume that the small pebble inclusions were intentionally designed to sabotage the structure of the vessel – creating points of stress within the glass as a foreign and incompatible material during the annealing process and causing the object to naturally fracture after its creation. The breakage provided the opportunity for Ivy to “repair” the glass object in a highly complicated and intimate way. By relying on simple found materials and ingenuity, Ivy was able to “design” an interior support system that utilized physics to reassemble the broken pieces without the aid of adhesives or fixatives. Due to the cleanliness of the fractures, the clever construction (consisting of twine, bamboo, and a rock) holds all the fragments together into a unified whole. Ivy’s



use of the intentional mishap was to serve more of a practical purpose: of crafting the impending disaster unto his vessel as equally masterful as his creation of the vessel itself. In this case, the competent disfiguration of the glass object gave way to an opportunity to conserve and mend it.

Achieving irregularity within the other Thesis Work wasn’t as dependent on my physical presence and relied entirely upon happenstance. The crumpled nature of the bottles within “Congregants of Lost Cause and Lamentation” was made possible by the natural conditions of a blown object’s response to the environment of a hot kiln, as was the collapse of “Our Defense...”. The manner in which the glass moved in these instances was, although regulated, independent of my physical touch. Even the broken edge acquired in “Roughneck Sportsmanship” was accomplished by circumstantial means. Whether allowing these pieces to warp under formidable temperatures or to burst under overwhelming molecular stress, the atmospheric conditions, as opposed to my premeditative actions, were responsible for eliciting change. This idea of relying upon the vulnerability of glass and allowing the nature of its transformation to occur by external circumstances reflects an equally submissive behavior by me – to allow the splendor of the form’s irregularity to come from something other than my own hand.



Although eliciting a sense of misery within the work, this release of personal will within the process of it's making reflects a healthy dismissal of personal control. This idea of relinquishing one's purpose is reflected in both the process and content of the work by Lithuanian-based Vaida Andrasiunaite.

In accumulating a variety of commonplace blown glass objects – containers for food, beverage, cooking, and preservation – Vaida had manipulated their formal structure to various degrees of deflation and set them amidst a generic domestic environment within the installation “Abfall.” There are a great number of slumped objects that are placed in a seemingly disoriented arrangement cluttering a wooden tabletop, the stool beside it, and strewn across the surrounding hardwood floor. Their sporadic placement implies that these objects have been discarded both physically and metaphorically dropped: left behind, and forgotten after a raucous dinner party. Although their placement certainly alludes to these objects as being garbage littering a fictitious domestic space, the objects themselves reflect an empathetic quality of human fatigue



and overuse. As a result, the installation exudes an element of sadness due to the “depressed” condition of the glass objects and of the lifeless clutter of their abandonment. Andrasiunaite’s utilization of the competent mishandling of the symmetrical glass form was of a highly poetic intent – a visual pun in refusing to allow these objects to maintain their naturally fixed stature in an effort to transform them into objects of “refuse.”

Craftsmanship, prior to the Thesis Work, was something I associated with aesthetics: a superficial consideration that skill, experience, and technical virtuosity were only an indication of something being made “properly”. However, while at work I recognized that I put more effort into thinking about and conducting a sense of “wellness” within the competent mishandling of each piece than I did in composing symmetrical form. I wasn’t intending to reject the idea of perfection in undoing the structure of each piece’s formal arrangement, for the power of each piece’s transformation relied heavily upon each object originally being of a seemingly “perfect” arrangement. Perhaps the practice would be better classified as a cognitive dismissal of perfection being an absolute within my studio practice. Whether uniform or not, craftsmanship, ultimately, is quality driven work – utilizing material to make a meaningful connection to not only the thing being made, but also the purposes in making it. Crafting the mishap involved every bit of competency, intention, and awareness as it does when trying to avoid it. The degree of excellence in which each object’s formal disruption was measured was by how uncontrived and uncreated the disruption appeared

as if the mishap had naturally occurred and implying that the calamitous nature of each finished piece had always existed.

In the “Unknown Craftsman”, Soetsu Yanagi makes a statement that the conscious departing from a fixed form is as an expression of man’s quest for freedom (119). Although this particular phrasing reads slightly tacky to me, I do believe that there was a personal compellation to investigate the fallible quality of glass as an extension of subconsciously investigating the significance of my own human shortcomings. Whether I will ever be accepting of the frequent and unexpected experience of failure and folly within my day-to-day living, the occasional mishap often provides an individual an opportunity to better him or herself – to rely on the grace of happenstance and find personal salvation within an unforeseen and unexpected resolution to that which sucker-punches our reality. Rather than being something to avoid, the inclusion of the mishap was a willful acceptance of the uncomfortable nature with which transformation occurs within the human experience, both literally and figuratively.

#### **Chapter 4: Imagery In Service of Meaning**

*Yawning deep and with great fatigue, he raised his left hand to his face. He fit his eye into the meat of his palm while letting go of a thoroughly exhausted exhale...the pressure, somehow, giving him a sense of alarm and stirring his attention temporarily. Contemplating whether or not he should refill his cup one last time he half smiled once he came to a conclusion. “I was raised on the principle that I shouldn’t do things just to get them done, but to do them well.” The chugging sound from the bottle pouring one last time served as a fitting punctuation mark...*

Historically, the vessel has often stood as an object “decorated” with pictorial narrative. There is a long tradition of craft associated materials incorporating the inclusion of image and/or text within or upon its surface and the practice has been a highly concentrated aspect within my work prior to and during the development of the work within the Thesis Exhibition. There is a personal appeal towards contemporizing the practice of vessel ornamentation, but there is also an attraction towards personally contributing my own perspective within its legacy...to create a relationship with a common past.

Graphics have often stood as a source of ornamentation upon an object’s surface and I suppose it is a natural instinct for those of us who are inclined to combine the two to regard the object as a “three-dimensional canvas.” However, the objective in using imagery within the Thesis Work was to reconsider the relationship between the object and the pictorial application as something much more than merely being “glass which hosts graphic content.” This perspective acknowledges a sort of separation or hierarchy between the three dimensional object and the two-dimensional elements applied upon its surface. The “glass object as a canvas” perspective indicates that the glass is meant to

only serve as a display system for the imagery, whereas my interest was in creating a situation that the two rely on one another to convey meaning. My interests in applying pictorial narratives upon a three-dimensional surface wasn't to simply "ornament" the vessel as a decorative accessory, but to collaborate as two visual components to effectively contribute towards each piece's overall purpose. It is an issue of intention: adorning a vessel as if it were a "three-dimensional canvas" versus integrating it to serve a purpose unique to the circumstances that form the setting for an idea. Imagery within the Thesis Work was to be *utilized* as a visual component in the service of each piece's conceptual purpose – to make use of imagery and script in a sculptural context.

Of course, the ultimate purpose of my use of imagery was to serve as a visual device in depicting various narratives of tragic consequence. However, the narrative wasn't necessarily something that I wanted the images to deliver single-handedly. There was to be a reciprocal relationship between the images, the objects that they had been applied on, and the nature in which those objects had been "mishandled" in order for the essence of each narrative to be properly communicated. This cyclical connectivity from these three aspects of each piece within the Thesis Exhibition was meant to convey the spirit of a particular narrative as opposed to telling a story in full. Imagery, in my case, was utilized to present an abstracted or ambiguous narrative – components that formed a certain context to graphically represent a particular instance of human conflict or calamity. The graphic content was meant to allude to the poetic nature of the tragic condition of its characters by speaking about a fictitious circumstance in a highly cryptic nature. Without the presence of script, without a sense of chronological order in their placement, without a definite beginning or a definite end, and with no sign of resolution the imagery represents itself as an obscure series of events – an account of something that, due to the lack of specifics, allows the viewer to emotionally fill in the blanks and place him or herself within the predicament hypothetically. The bottle that the imagery is applied upon – its metaphorical associations coupled with its altered form - provides the character from which how the object speaks about the narrative upon its surface. In a sense, the bottle is a speech bubble that informs the viewer in *how* the graphic content is spoken of. If the imagery depicts a particular scene then the formal structure with which it is all affixed to provides the nature of its delivery - the dialect of its voice, its intonation, articulation, clarity, and so on. To think about imagery as a sculptural component meant that I had to not only consider its relationship to the object it was upon, but to create a situation where the content of the piece *relied* on that partnership - to exceed beyond mere visual stimulation and provide resonance.

Aside from the purpose of withholding pictorial content of the ambiguous narrative, imagery was utilized in some cases to take advantage of being placed upon an object made of glass – to depend upon the visual and physical characteristics unique to this material. The transparency of a blown glass object lent towards the visual portrayal of the act of introspection – the internal observation of one's own cognitive processes. In the piece "A Fine Connoisseur of Regret" a swatch of matte white concealed the clutter of text beneath it. When viewing the illustrated image upon the white swatch straight on there is no indication of its presence upon the piece. The text only becomes apparent when looking through the bottle body and onto the backside of the imagery hosted on the



opposing wall. Although difficult to immediately decipher, the curious viewer is given the opportunity to examine an unintelligible monologue of the character with which the bottle form personifies. On a similar note, the act of retrospection – of recalling a past memory to cognitively review in the present – was integrated within the piece “Roughneck Sportsmanship.” The peculiar position of the bottle within its wooden rack allowed the piece to suspend at a laterally oriented angle. The imagery, placed upon one side of the object to reference a beer label, was facing towards the ground. Due to the limitations provided by this positioning, the imagery was only capable of being viewed from behind. The transparency of the glass object and the translucency of the decals fired upon it allowed for the viewer to literally “look back” upon the course of events for which the bottle was fictitiously involved in.

Transparency was also utilized within the piece “Spillage at the Tavern” where images were placed in order to interact with the images placed upon the opposing side of the bottle. Although relying on the interior space of a hollow object, an element of “layering” imagery enabled a surface withholding singular images to become dimensional scenes of a highly disjointed narrative. In this case, the compositional potential of the imagery relied on the transparent and colorless nature of glass to superimpose with imagery placed directly behind it on the opposite wall: images regarded directly in front of the viewer serving as the foreground while the image directly behind it serving as the scene’s background.

Although my interest was to explore a variety of materials and methods in pursuing the narrative aspect of the work, the process of firing decals upon a hollow glass object lent towards an interesting relationship between the content of the graphics and the deformation of the form it was fired upon. In the piece “Our Defense Was Built Upon Obedience and Gullibility” the imagery (consisting of symbols, figures, and scenes within a vintage nuclear fallout instructional manual) were applied upon the surface of a seemingly radioactive glass object. As the glass form buckled and collapsed under the high temperatures of the firing process, the stationary nature of the images was equally disturbed, bending and warping as helplessly as its manipulated host was under the dominating heat of the kiln. This piece in particular was pursued with an intention to thoughtfully *affect* the image – to provide a sense of irony between the source material that the image was based on and the process of permanently affixing them onto the surface of a structurally vulnerable hollow glass object.

There are a great number of artists who share this interest in modernizing and personalizing the practice of integrating imagery and three-dimensional form...especially within contemporary crafts. Although there remains an impulse to pay homage to the ancient craftsmen who worked exhaustively in their practice of vessel ornamentation, there is a natural and contemporary tendency to approach the same practice in a manner that debunks the virtue of their intentions...using traditional processes of “ornamentation” that ironically beautifies the object with graphic content that addresses unpleasant issues or narrative accounts. Grayson Perry, a British ceramicist, relies heavily upon both classical forms and traditional methods of applying graphics into their surface to confront personal experiences of conflict. In composing mammothly



proportioned, hand-built renditions of classical pottery he then *claims* its surface with graphic content. Challenging themes regarding gender, violence, and sexuality bombard the surface, applied by a plethora of traditional mark-making techniques upon a ceramic body: designs marked into the clay wall, intricately complicated glazing, and fired photo transfers begin to overwhelm the form until its former identity and function as a mere vessel is forgotten. In fact, the viewer's understanding of the form's initial function serves as an important metaphorical component to addressing socially challenging issues. As seen within the piece "The Triumph of Innocence" the interdependency between the content of the imagery and the particular form with which it is upon is crucial in its commentary. Although often

implanting images designed with irony and composed of shockingly confrontational details, "The Triumph of Innocence" detours into a more optimistic realm of his imagination: images of jubilant children and pleasantly iconographic symbols associated with adolescence upon a golden urn. Imagery, in Perry's case, is used intentionally to overcome and conquer the exterior of the vessel within their forceful placement, suggesting a refusal to let the radiance of child-like purity, wonder, and euphoria extinguish amidst the harsh realities of adulthood.

Another instance of the contemporary consideration of traditionally adorning a three-dimensional object with imagery is seen within the collaborative work of Robbie Miller and John Drury. Together as CUD, the two artists are widely recognized for many significant and intuitively pursued works that resurrect discarded glass (as well as



discarded glass practices) and provide them a new and extraordinary vigor and vitality. Within the piece "Bamboos" the two had accumulated numerous versions of the same manufactured bottle form. After the event of cutting and grinding each bottle into open-ended truncations of their previous selves, CUD proceeded to stack each segment on top of one another. Using a thick bead of rubber caulking, each segment was affixed to one another to compose an exaggeratingly stretched-out version of its self, standing as tall as an average human. Imagery, in this particular CUD piece, was applied by the traditional manner of painting and firing vitreous enamels upon a glass surface. However, the application of the paint was of a highly non-traditional purpose, conducted in an abstracted pattern rather than as pictorial portraiture. The objects themselves, aside from

looking like freakishly tall bottles, mimic the physical characteristics of bamboo: the height, girth, and segmentation of its trunk into cylindrical components. CUD's application of the paint was meant to provide coloration and topical patterning to further enhance the object's likeness of a bamboo plant. In this case, imagery upon the vessel body was pursued as a different kind of agent of representation. Rather than of portraying an impression of someone or something's likeness upon the object, imagery was used to transform the likeness of the object itself.

Although still an artist who primarily works with a "craft"-based material, Polly Apfelbaum's use of fabric and dye is perhaps the most inspiring utilization of imagery within a sculptural context. Within the piece "Cartoon Garden," Apfelbaum composes a pictorial installation of simplified flower forms layered atop one another upon the floor.



The "garden" is a large, confined rectangle of cut and dyed fabric that carries an adolescent sensitivity of a child's rendering within their crafting. Although entirely black and white, the gestural quality of each flower speaks at a highly animated volume – loose and continuous arcing lines that define the petals of each different flower. The arrangement on the floor also contributes to the vitality of such a seemingly "flat" work. Within the imaginary edge of the "garden" a great many number of variously sized flower shapes are placed and layered on top of one another, hiding any evidence that they are on the floor and visually "growing wild" within their appropriated environment. For Apfelbaum, the images *are* the objects within the installation and used not to adorn the space, but to transform the viewer's perspective of the space as being a physical portrayal of an imaginative setting.

It is a difficult set of considerations when an artist composes three-dimensional work that includes graphic content - to entice and build visual intrigue beyond a viewer's initial "read". Imagery and text are difficult to utilize because they are so identifiable, so literal that they often visually lend too much information to the viewer...leading him or her to being told how to interpret a piece. In my opinion, the most compelling work is the kind that allows the viewer to invest him or herself into its ambiguity...work that stimulates him or her intellectually, imaginatively, and possibly spiritually. Making personal connections to things can only happen if one is allowed to interpret a visual experience according to his or her personal condition. There is a fine line that distinguishes the utilization of imagery or text of being realistic or abstract, representational or impressionistic, prosaic or poetic. Imagery and text within three-dimensional work will always naturally cause intrigue due to the human interest in and immediate understanding of pictorial renderings. However, it can only prove effective

when used conscientiously. My use of imagery within the Thesis Work, therefore, was pursued in an equally considerate intent as the three artists mentioned above: to be more provocative and purposeful than merely appealing.

### **Chapter 5: Resolve and Reconsideration**

*He took the glass with what little drink was left in it and stood up to face toward the lawn. He threw the contents over his porch railing and the sound of the impact that the fluid and melted ice cubes had with the ground was soft and subdued. As he walked towards the front door the rocking chair from which he rose from slightly swayed, as if waving goodbye to whom it had nurtured that evening. With one hand on the doorknob he paused and turned his head to where he had just been sitting with his company. "Goodnight," he slurred to no one in particular. He let himself within his home as two empty rocking chairs softly swayed in the subtle breeze.*

In reflecting back upon the Thesis work I am reminded that the direction of the work was a passionate attempt to dramatically redefine myself. There was an overwhelming sense of frustration with who I was as an artist and how preciously I interacted with glass. I was, in a sense, just a glassblower previous to my graduate experience and was capable of only generating product rather than work based on ideas. In turn, The Thesis Work served as a platform to establish a new identity as a glassmaker by a desire to dramatically alter how I utilize the material and how I think about its capabilities. By drawing upon historical glass, contemporary craft, and popular culture my graduate career was pursued with a vigorous appetite for personal transformation; "change", therefore, being a reoccurring concept integrated within the Thesis Work. Whether by literally altering the formal structure of each piece or figuratively altering the way in which I approached the application of each piece's graphic content, my studio practice had been noticeably modified by the end of my graduate experience.

This dissertation has been, admittedly, composed almost two years to the day after the completion of the work within my Thesis Exhibition. Although it is highly encouraged that the MFA candidate complete his or her written Thesis by the end of his or her second graduate year, I must say that the distance from the work had been incredibly useful in composing this paper. In reconsidering the conceptual origins of the work, the technical explorations, and the discoveries along the way I feel as though there was more significance within the work than what was originally intended. Layers of subconscious intent and pleasant surprises had been recognized (and probably could have only *been* recognized) within the Thesis Work well after the piece's had been made. If nothing else, the time in between the completion of the Thesis Exhibition and this finished paper allowed me to seriously consider my creative intentions in full...and how those ideas have redirected my thoughts currently on glass and my future studio practice. Glass will always remain a unique surface to explore my interest in words and images

upon, but its capability to physically simulate human vulnerability is something that wouldn't have been recognized previous to the work within the Thesis Exhibition.

The nature of my work has always been highly introspective. Although seemingly stable and confident, I am often distressed by my own faults and failures that often lead to an overwhelming sense of personal uncertainty and insecurity. For me, making is an activity with which I can impose order upon my mental and emotional processes and find a sense of meaning amidst the occasional clutter of doubt and disappointment. I don't usually make statements with my work, but I will admit that I do make testimonial confessions of a certain callused grandeur within being human. Whether or not this remains a significant aspect of my future work, I think it is a natural thing for one to take a curious fascination at that which distinguishes him or herself as an individual. As a result, I will always be drawn to the human response to personal conflict ...not necessarily because I romanticize about tragedy, but because there is an ironic beauty within the purpose of experiencing struggle, humility, and defeat. Whether we like it or not, these discomforting factors allow us to continually redefine ourselves and, therefore, serve as highly transformative opportunities.

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My hope is that I can continue to provide you all with a sense of pride into who and what you've contributed towards from here on out.





**A Fine Connoisseur of Regret**

Blown Glass, Mixed Media  
Greatest Height: 36"  
2008





**“Congregants of Lost Cause and Lamentation”**

Blown and Slumped Glass, Paper, Ink  
Greatest Height: 28”  
2008



**“Our Failure Gives Them Pleasure”**

Blown Glass, Decal, Mixed Media  
Height: 72”, Width: 7 ½”, Depth 7 ½”  
2008



**“Our Defense Was Built Upon Obedience and Gullibility ”**

Blown and Slumped Glass, Decal, Mixed Media  
Height: 32”, Width: 8”, Depth: 8”  
2008





**"Spillage at the Tavern"**

Blown Glass, Decal, Mixed Media  
Greatest Height: 72"  
2008



**“Roughneck Sportsmanship”**

Blown and Broken Glass, Decal, Mixed Media  
Height: 48”, Width: 48”, Depth: 24”  
2008